Morning Instructions

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 55:32

Good morning, everyone. I hope you had a restful night because we had quite a rousing opening last night with the thunder and lightning right in the middle of our opening. I remember people used to tell me that in the land of Goenka retreats, they considered a major storm at the start of a retreat a really good omen. So I think we had a really good omen last night. I hope you slept well and found your way to breakfast this morning.

Today, as we talked about last night and as you've seen from the schedule, it's a light opening day. There's quite a bit of free time, open time, time for conversation or going for walks, helping pull some of the apples down from the many trees down below. They do get used in cooking, so bringing them down now will help you eat later. It's a good investment, and it's also just fun to do something in community.

I want to give preliminary instructions this morning for our meditation. Sally began last night, and I'll go over some of that same ground. But I wanted to step back and take a big-level view of meditation and our style of meditation.

There are so many different lineages of meditation in the world. I think every major spiritual tradition has its own approach. Certainly you find it in Christianity and Judaism and Islam and Taoism and all the yogic schools. In the Buddhist schools, there are many different techniques that could be applied.

In the realm of insight meditation, which of course we practice here because it's the name on the building, it tends to center around this practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is becoming a big word in the world today. It's amazing to me how widespread the interest in mindfulness has become, and a lot of it is through secular doorways—mindfulness-based stress reduction, secular mindfulness, mindfulness magazine, and so on.

But it was presented originally by the Buddha as the direct path to liberation. He says that really clearly in a discourse, the Satipatthana Sutta. The development of the four establishments of mindfulness is the direct path that leads in only one direction, and that is to liberation. So that is really the cornerstone of insight meditation.

All the different retreats that you'll attend here and at Spirit Rock are under this banner, with the exception of the Brahmavihara retreats. They're focused on metta, compassion, joy, and equanimity. So we're in the realm of mindfulness practice, and we will be for the six weeks or three months, including metta practice along the way.

What is amazing to me is that this simple quality—mindfulness has something to do with an attention to

the present moment—that this simple attending to the present moment can take us from here all the way to complete liberation. In fact, if you didn't know you were heading in that direction, you're going there anyway. As I think Sally said last night, if you start and you continue, that's where it ends up. So just a warning: if you don't want to be on that path, you've taken the wrong flight.

How can it do that? We'll be talking a lot about mindfulness and how that works, how that function works. But I would say in the whole spectrum of mindfulness practices, they're distinguished by basically two things. One is what we choose to pay attention to. And the second is the way that we connect with what we're paying attention to. You'll see as the instructions go on, there are different ways of connecting. It may not be immediately apparent, but there are different ways of connecting.

Obviously you know there are lots of different things you can pay attention to. I'm sure you found that in your earlier retreats: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, and emotions is the basic outline of what we pay attention to. The Buddha made this really clear in the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the Satipatthana Sutta, which is the basis for Vipassana practice in general.

What was revolutionary in his teaching is that this simple faculty of paying attention in a certain way leads to liberation when supported by ethical conduct and when trained to lead onward to wisdom. So it's really these three branches that come together for us: the basis of ethical conduct, or sila, and we'll emphasize that when we do a formal retreat opening this evening. We'll all take the five precepts together as a community. The development of mindfulness is our primary meditation, and how that leads onward to developing liberating insight—how that leads to the wisdom that frees us, frees our heart and mind.

So we already know there are all these different things we can pay attention to with mindfulness: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thoughts, emotions, and more. And then in terms of how we connect, sometimes we're instructed to really pierce the object with our attention, to make a really strong connection to the object called piercing it.

Other times we're more encouraged to be relaxed, receptive, and just let the object come and touch it gently. These two differences will have an impact on our attitude and our relationship to the experiences through our six senses. We'll give instructions on both the objects and the way of approaching as we go.

Once we have that as the field, in the three-month course, we give instructions in a specific way. It is a way that follows the teaching—and I would say very brilliant teaching—of Mahasi Sayadaw, who was a Burmese monk from the 20th century. I would say that Mahasi Sayadaw was the most influential meditation master of the 20th century. He established hundreds of centers in Burma. His followers have established hundreds of centers around the world, both in Asia and the West—this being one of them, Spirit Rock being one of them.

The beauty of his meditation instructions is that they map onto that whole range of experience that the Buddha outlined in a very precise and systematic way. We are going to try to convey what we understand

as the essence of those instructions in this retreat. This is not just a random fancy of one of us. The IMS three-month team as a whole—meaning both part one and part two—have made the decision to adopt Mahasi Sayadaw's instructions as our basis. So that's what we'll be teaching.

Now you may come from a different lineage within the Vipassana world. You may have come from the lineage of Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Sumedho, the Thai forest tradition. You may have been practicing in recent years with Venerable Analayo, a bhikkhu who's resident just down the street and currently in retreat. You may have practiced with S.N. Goenka, whose instructions came from his Burmese teacher, U Ba Khin.

All of those approaches are fine. We're not exclusive about how you want to practice. If you want to bring in other approaches, talk with your teacher. Let your teacher know what you're doing, what you'd like to do, and you all can work it out. We're not rigid. We love the other approaches. Most of us have practiced in many other styles, found they brought a lot of benefit, and so we're very open to that. But what we'll be teaching are the Mahasi Sayadaw instructions, modified as they've evolved over many years of three-month teaching.

When Mahasi Sayadaw gave the instructions, he basically told everyone up front how to relate to experiences at all the sense doors. So on the first day, you'd get instructions about breath, body sensations, sounds, sights, thoughts, emotions, subtle experiences of mind. That's a lot to take in. We don't want to overwhelm you on the first morning. What we're going to do is kind of trickle these instructions out day by day, adding a little more detail until finally we cover the whole range.

The aim as we present meditation in this three-month retreat is for you to be able to be mindful with any experience you're having in any of the postures—sitting, walking, standing, lying down—at any time. Basically, if it's in your experience, it's grounds for our mindfulness practice. That's where we're aiming. Many of you have followed these instructions for a long time and you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't been at a three-month course, you may not have gotten them in quite this sequence of instructions. So that's the approach we're going to take.

We recognize that as we begin with simple objects like breath, body, sounds—as Sally did last night—it's not that you aren't having thoughts and emotions. You are. And you may know already, hopefully you do, how to work with them. Those instructions will come a little later, but if they're arising and you're able to be with them mindfully, please do.

We're going to begin by offering the suggestion that you start with something we call an anchor. In this style of vipassana practice, an anchor is an object that you come back to repeatedly out of preference, out of choice. Actually the three areas that Sally talked about last night are all suitable choices for anchors.

Classically, the anchor is the breath. When Mahasi Sayadaw presented the instructions, I think that was the anchor that was offered. As we've evolved the instructions over the years, we've found that it's helpful

to offer a choice of anchors for meditators. We'll offer those three choices, and I'll explain them again in the guided meditation.

The value of an anchor is that in the early days of the retreat, you choose to come back to that same point again and again. You're with the anchor. You're with the anchor. You're with the anchor. Thoughts come. We're carried away in thought. At some point you wake up—oh, back to the present moment. What should I do? Oh, come back to the anchor. So we reconnect with breath, body, or sounds. And that sets us on the mindfulness track again.

We find that having an anchor is helpful because it tends to build up our ability to maintain stable attention in the present moment. Once that stability has grown somewhat, we like to open up to all the changing objects that are happening at all six sense doors. But if we go into all six sense doors immediately, it can feel a little overwhelming, distracting, and difficult to remain stable. That's why we're going to build up through this emphasis in the first few days on an anchor. I'll include that in the guiding as we start the meditation, and I hope you'll get a sense for it.

So with that as preface, welcome to the world of Mahasi Sayadaw. Please sit comfortably. Normally in our style of meditation we sit with closed eyes—this reduces the distraction a bit. But if you're used to sitting with eyes open and you prefer that, that's fine too. Mostly we sit with eyes closed.

As you settle into your meditation posture, rediscover that element that Sally talked about last night: the combination of uprightness with the spine being somewhat straight, and relaxation. You're starting from a point of ease, not needing to change anything in your present experience, but allowing yourself to rest in it.

As you settle into the present moment, take a moment to notice what's here. What's in your experience right now? There are body sensations. There are sounds. There's some mood that you've come in with or find yourself in. Thoughts may be coming and going. Images can arise and pass. There is a visual field, but with eyes closed, not much going on—just a little gray.

With that kind of wide open look at what's here, we can start to narrow the attention a little bit. Part of the training in mindfulness is developing the ability to guide the attention, to train the attention. So first we allow the attention to settle in the body posture as you're sitting. Feel the uprightness of the posture. Look throughout to see if there are any obvious areas of holding. You can relax the forehead. Soften the eyes. Let the jaw be unclenched. Let the shoulders drop. Let the belly be soft. And let your sitting base support your uprightness with strength.

As you sit with the attention on the whole body posture in sitting, can you get the sense that the body posture itself could be a focus for mindfulness? Can you possibly take in at a glance the whole body in sitting? From the top of the head through the torso and pelvis, the legs and feet. You may not get 100% with a glance—you might get 50, you might get 75. But see how that feels, bringing your attention to the

whole body posture in sitting.

This reference point, the posture in sitting, can become an anchor. It's a reliable thing to come back to again and again because it's always there.

Now open your attention up and let it become wide. Let your attention open to all the sounds that are around you. Some may be in front, some behind, right or left, or overhead. Sounds from inside—my voice, the fans, each other. Sounds from outside. When your attention is open and a sound arises, you don't have to make any effort to hear. The sound arises and it's known spontaneously. You just have to be receptive, ready to receive, open and ready to receive.

You can have a sense in the meditation on sounds that it can be very restful. The way you're not directing the attention anywhere—you're just sitting in the middle of all the sounds, very open, in a receiving mode, not sending the mind out, just receptive. Receptive. Taking sounds as a focus can enhance the sense of easefulness, relaxation. So this is the second possible anchor: just an openness to sounds wherever they arise.

Now, bringing the attention back into the body posture, can you be open to the body in the same way as to sounds? That is, you're just in the mode of receiving all the different sensations throughout the body.

What's being felt within the body right now. We're not trying to keep the attention on the whole body—we're simply opening to what's happening in the body. Can we just receive that, without judging or trying to fix it?

As you connect with the body in this receptive way, you'll naturally notice the sensations connected with breathing. Every time there's an in-breath, certain sensations are felt. Every time there's an out-breath, different sensations are felt.

Now narrow the focus and bring your attention to the sensations of breathing. Breathing in, where are sensations felt in the body? Breathing out, where are sensations felt? And how is it just to feel those sensations—to notice them as breathing and simply feel them?

As to where you feel them or where you direct the attention with the breath, there's not one right way. Some people naturally feel the sensations most clearly around the tip of the nose. For others, it might be in the belly, or it could be in the chest. Or it could be through the whole body—keeping the perspective of the whole body while sitting and feeling the breath. See where for you it's easiest to connect with breathing. It could be in any of these ways. Then choose that as your primary focus in the meditation for now.

So the breath is the third possible anchor. Many of you have spent considerable time with the breath—it may be very accessible. If that's so, this can be an excellent anchor for you.

In the remainder of this sitting, play a little with these three choices of anchor: the whole body in sitting, sounds, or breath. See which one feels most reliable for you as a way to stay connected to the present

moment. That's the purpose of an anchor.

Of course, whichever one you choose, thoughts will come, and you'll be swept away for periods of time. We'll lose the connection to the present moment, following some train of thought. Then after a while, we'll wake up from that thought excursion and be back in the present moment. Appreciate that return—that unwilled return to the present moment—and then choose to connect again with your anchor.

This willingness to come back from thought excursions and connect again with the present through your anchor—this is what will build the stability of mind and stability of attention.

So in your formal sittings today—and there are several more formal sittings on the schedule—please continue to play with this concept of an anchor. See if one of these focuses works well for you: body posture, sounds, or breathing, as a way to stabilize the attention in the present. That's really what we're trying to develop over the first few days of the retreat. Then as we go day by day, we'll open up the instructions, refine these guidances, and bring in other objects as we go. First few days, we're trying to stabilize.

Of course, today is really a day for settling in. You're in the three-month course—six weeks or three months. It's not a sprint. So don't knock yourself out in the first hundred yards of this journey. Enter at your own pace, at a sustainable pace for now. You can always pick up the pace later—don't worry.

As you go through the day today, there are formal structured sitting periods. Continue as you like with other sittings and formal walking during the day. There are also some informal times. We really wanted to build in time because you're coming for such a long stretch. If there are business items or personal items from home that you need to finish before you can really go fully into silence, please take today to do that.

A few words about the schedule today: After we finish this session, the managers will come in and give a talk about details of the retreat, answering any questions you have about logistics. We'll finish about 9:15 here, and then there will be a fifteen-minute break—basically a bathroom break. Please stay in silence through that break. Come back in for the managers' announcements at 9:30.

When the managers' announcements finish—they have 9:45 as their scheduled finish—I've never seen managers finish announcements in fifteen minutes, however may it be so—at 9:45 or thereabouts is an open time.

You're invited to participate in apple picking. You're invited to carry on your own practice as you like. And just a guideline for that open period, which goes basically until 11:45 on this schedule, but really until lunchtime: please keep all the buildings in silence—certainly the meditation hall, dorms, walking rooms, but even the dining hall. Once people start talking in there, if others are trying to maintain their mindfulness and quiet through the day, the dining room gets very, very loud. So throughout the building, please keep it quiet so those who wish to enter more fully into the silence can be supported in that. But if you'd like to be outside from 9:45 to lunch, and again there's a period in the late afternoon, feel free to

talk, connect, help with the apples.

Take care of any personal business that's still remaining. As you go through the morning, if you'd like to do some more formal practice, I'll give really brief instructions for walking meditation. We'll really expand these starting tomorrow when we move into a full schedule of sitting and walking.

Many of you, probably most of you, have done formal walking before. There are some traditions where it's not taught. And so I'll just say briefly that the formal walking is about as exciting as the formal sitting. So that is to say, you're not going for a walk to enjoy nature. You pick a walking path, maybe twenty to thirty paces long. You walk from one end to the other, experiencing primarily your body in movement. A convenient focus is the activity in the legs and feet. But some people like to be with the whole body. Some people like to be more focused just on the sensations in the feet. That's fine. Starting off a retreat, I like to stay with the whole body or the legs and feet all together.

Find a pace. You can experiment with pace. We have more or less three gears that we talk about. One is normal pace. One is a little slower. And one is really slow—what we call the creeping or tortoise pace. So you'll probably see people doing all three. Find the one that keeps you relaxed and present. That's really the guideline: what keeps the mindfulness steady and continuous.

So walking from one end to the other, twenty to thirty paces. Stop when you reach the other end. Take a moment to orient in standing. Standing is also a great meditation posture. Mindfully turn and then walk back to the other end, trying to be with each step, with your chosen focus—whole body or legs and feet. Reach the other end, stand, turn around, walk back. So again, it's not so much going for a walk as just finding a comfortable and convenient way to sustain the mindfulness in the best way possible, meaning be present to your experience as best you can. Keep the same attitude of being relaxed and alert. It's a little harder to fall asleep in walking, so it provides good energy balance.

At three o'clock this afternoon, there will be in the hall a meeting for all of you called Being in Community. A few of us will lead you through some exercises, give you a little chance to connect with one another formally, and talk about what it means to be in a diverse and inclusive community as IMS is growing into and seeks to become. That will be from 3:00 to 3:45, and we ask that everyone please come to that. I think you'll find it enjoyable and interesting.

Then this evening at five with the light dinner, we go back into full silence. So the return to silence really marks the entry into the formal retreat atmosphere, and we will make that very clear tonight with a formal course opening. The 7:30 dharma talk tonight will be a formal entryway into a long retreat, and we'll also take the refuges and precepts together as a community to demonstrate our shared commitment to values and to care for one another.

Carol just suggested that I say a little bit about interviews. In this retreat, we will be meeting with you for individual interviews. Sally likes to call them practice meetings. I'm in the old school frame of thought

where we've called them interviews for about forty years. But we're not really interviewing you for a job or anything. They're meetings to talk about how your practice is going. So we will begin with those on Friday in a few days. In this retreat, all your practice meetings will be one-to-one. So you'll be meeting one-to-one with two teachers who will alternate with you. Generally, you'll get two or three interviews in a week. The teachers do take days off in the long retreat.

These are affectionately called Teacher's Mental Health Days. So there will be a couple of days each week when we're not doing formal scheduled interviews, but there will be five days of one-to-one interviews every week, with you alternating between two teachers.

In addition, Monica is kindly offering optional sign-up interviews in the afternoons. Generally on a day when you haven't had a formal practice meeting in the morning, there will be the opportunity to sign up for a limited number of spots to meet with Monica for a practice meeting in the afternoon. This is really for people who have something actively happening in their practice—it's not just a chance to hang out with Monica because she's such a nice person, although she is, and you will enjoy hanging out with her. But please come to her if you have something related to your practice that you really want to talk about. There will be sign-ups on the board after the morning sit. I believe she will start to offer those tomorrow.

So that's all I can think of for now. We wish you well in this day of transition, and we'll continue to see you throughout the day. Enjoy your day of settling.

We now have a fifteen-minute break, basically a bathroom break. Please maintain the silence, and then the managers will be here at 9:30.

Thank you.

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